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ABSTRACT

The effect of counselor attire on outcomes of an initial counseling session was studied in a counseling analogue. Clients were 54 female undergraduates enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at a large Mideastern university. Each client volunteered to discuss a concern of a personal-social nature with a doctoral student in counseling psychology. Three counselors interviewed six clients in each of three attire conditions: traditional, casual, and highly casual. Analysis of main effects showed that counselor attire impacted the A-State Anxiety Scale. The Newman Keuls test showed that clients felt significantly lower anxiety with a casually attired counselor than with a highly casually attired counselor; no differences emerged between casual and traditional attire on the anxiety measure. A post hoc analysis with an item of the PFQ eliciting clients' preference for personal dress revealed a relationship between clients' reported personal dress and counselor attire in affecting the anxiety measure. Clients reported significantly less anxiety with a counselor dressed in attire more formal than their own reported style of dress. Implications of the findings for counselors and questions for further research are presented. (Author)

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EFFECT OF COUNSELOR ATTIRE ON OUTCOMES OF AN INITIAL COUNSELING SESSION

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Of the contextual variables that have been examined, one of the most commonly neglected or taken for granted has been counselor dress. In everyday living we are constantly confronted with the many and varied styles of dress. On the newsstands we are exhorted by magazines such as Esquire, Gentleman's Quarterly, Cosmopolitan, and Vogue, to attire ourselves for leisure and business; enhance our sex appeal, attractiveness, potential for success, and status. Notwithstanding, the variability of attire that we see in contemporary society is reflected in the dress of psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors. Among student practicum and intern counselors in our colleges and universities we may run the gamut from tank tops, tube tops, blue jeans, dresses, skirts, shirts, suits, and slacks.

Despite the recognized importance of dress as a form of communication between individuals, research into the impact of counselor dress on counseling outcomes has been practically ignored. Instead, we have relied on convention and even etiquette for determining how we appear to our clients.

In the present study the impact of male counselor attire on the counseling outcomes of client anxiety and self-disclosure was examined following an initial counseling session. Based on a suggested by Delaney and Eisenberg in 1973 that a casual appearance could induce client relaxation, it was hypothesized that clients meeting with a casually attired

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counselor for a personal counseling session would experience less anxiety than clients meeting with a traditionally or highly casually attired counselor.

It was also hypothesized that a casually attired counselor would elicit greater client self-disclosure than a traditionally or highly casually attired counselor. Finally, client dogmatism was studied as a moderator variable to determine whether or not client's level of dogmatism would interact with counselor attire in affecting the dependent measures.

Method

The clients in the study were 54 female students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at the University of Maryland. Female clients were selected because a male counselor, female client dyad is most commonly seen in college counseling centers.

To recruit subjects, sign-up sheets were posted on a bulletin board where all sign-up sheets for psychology experiments were posted. To qualify, students were to have a concern of a personal-social nature (of which examples were given) that they could discuss with a doctoral student in counseling psychology for 45 minutes.

Students assigned themselves to an experimental condition on the basis of their selection of a convenient time for participation in the study. The students were not aware of the attire condition, nor of the counselor with whom they would meet.

The counselors were three male doctoral students in counseling psychology. Two of the counselors, aged 25 and 33, had completed three

individual counseling practicums and the remaining had no prior practicum experience.

General instructions were given to counselors on how to behave in the counseling sessions. In brief, counselors were told to interact with clients in a supportive, helping manner and not to allow their attire to differentially affect their behavior. Specific instructions were given on how to dress. In the traditional attire condition, counselors wore a dark sport coat, tie, and dark slacks. When casually dressed, counselors wore a sport shirt open at the collar, and casual pants. Finally, under the highly casual condition, counselors wore a sweat shirt and blue jeans. Each counselor interviewed 18 subjects, 6 under each attire condition, thereby yielding a completely crossed and balanced 3 x 3 factorial design.

Instrumentation

To measure clients' anxiety Spielberger, Gorsuch, and Lushene's A-State Scale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory was used. The scale is a 20-item Likert-type self-report measure of situational or transitory anxiety. Clients were instructed to report how they felt while they were in the counseling session.

The Disclosure Scale of Shapiro, Krauss, and Truax was employed to measure clients' propensity to self-disclose to their counselor. Clients were instructed to respond to the 24 items of the scale by indicating the degree to which they would engage in each type of disclosure behavior in the presence of the counselor.

Client dogmatism was measured by Rokeach's 40-item Form E of the Dogmatism Scale.

In addition to the measures already described, a 5-item questionnaire, the Personal Feeling Questionnaire, tailored expressly for the study, was administered. The items related to: (a) the clients' desire to be counseled for a personal-social concern by their counselor in the session; (b) the clients' conservativeness-liberalness; (c) the clients' evaluation of their counselor's expertness; (d) the clients' typical mode of personal attire; and (e) the clients' preference for counselor attire. Clients responded to these items on a 13-point rating scale by marking the point which most closely corresponded to their feeling.

Procedure

When the clients appeared at the University Counseling Center, they were given a script. The script, identical for each client, informed the clients that the purpose of the study was to examine some aspects of the communication process in counseling. Following questions, if any, the client was escorted to the counseling room and introduced to her counselor.

After completion of the session, the clients were taken to a room where they then completed the questionnaire packet. When this was completed, clients were debriefed. None of them guessed the true nature of the study.

Results

Again, the purpose of the study was to determine if counselor attire affected clients' anxiety and disclosure in an initial counseling session. Also, clients' dogmatism was investigated as a moderator variable with the attire factor to determine if an interaction effect would obtain on the dependent measures.

Analyses of variance showed the following. First, counselor attire significantly impacted the anxiety scale at the .05 level. Client disclosure was not affected by the attire treatment. Moreover, the counselors' factor did not reach significance on these measures.

The use of client dogmatism as a moderator variable with counselor attire failed to yield significant interactions on dependent measures.

A closer examination of the attire treatment's affect on the anxiety measure revealed that clients felt significantly lower anxiety with a casually attired counselor than with a highly casually attired counselor; no difference emerged between casual and traditional attire and traditional and highly casual attire.

An interesting finding came from the use of an item of the Personal Feeling Questionnaire which asked clients to report their typical style of personal dress. On the basis of clients' responses to this item, two groups were formed. One group preferred a highly casual personal dress; the other group preferred a casual form of personal dress. These two groups were then blocked across the attire treatment and the dependent measures were again examined.

From this procedure it was found that the clients who preferred a highly casual form of personal dress felt significantly less anxiety when meeting with a casually attired counselor, and the clients who preferred a casual mode of personal dress felt less anxiety with the traditionally attired counselor. In short, clients felt less anxiety when meeting with counselors dressed more formal relative to their own reported style of typical dress. In a parallel manner, the results of the client personal-dress block across the counselor attire treatment showed an interaction

effect on an item of the Personal Feeling Questionnaire. This item asked clients to indicate their desire to be counseled by their counselor in the study for a personal-social concern. What was found is that clients preferring a highly casual personal dress would most want to be counseled for a personal-social problem by a casually attired counselor and it was also found that clients preferring a casual personal dress would most want to be counseled for a personal-social problem by a traditionally attired counselor. That is, clients would most want to be counseled for a personal-social problem with a counselor dressed more formal relative to their own reported style of typical dress.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that counselor attire can affect counseling outcomes. As predicted, casual counselor attire elicited significantly lower anxiety scores than highly casual attire, but did not differentiate from traditional attire in affecting the anxiety measure. In addition, a relationship between the clients' reported typical dress with counselor attire emerged. As already indicated clients who reported a typical, highly casual personal dress felt less anxiety with a casually attired counselor and would most want to be counseled for a personal-social problem by a casually attired counselor. On the other hand, clients who reported a typical casual personal dress felt less anxiety with a traditionally attired counselor and would most want to be counseled by a traditionally attired counselor for a personal-social problem.

Despite the analogue nature of the study, it points out that counselor dress cannot be ignored as a contextual variable. It appears that

attire is an important variable for counselors and practicum students to consider. There may be limits to which counselors should allow an informalness in attire to go. In this study highly casual attire, i.e., sweat shirt and blue jeans, raised clients' anxiety to perhaps a dysfunctional level. An examination of the mean A-State scores of clients under each of the attire treatments showed that the experiment itself may have raised clients' anxiety. However, the mean score of clients seen by the highly casually attired counselor reached the ninety-first percentile on the standardized norms for the A-State Anxiety Scale.

Although in some situations it might prove useful to heighten a client's level of anxiety, it would not appear to be a useful goal when the point of the initial session is to create a comfortable relaxed atmosphere in which the client feels safe to relate the presenting problem.

The findings of the study clearly point to the need for further research. Questions which need to be addressed include:

1. What constitutes appropriate dress for female counselors?
2. Is there a maximally facilitative attire for counselors?
3. Do personality traits (other than dogmatism) of clients interact with the counselor's attire to affect counseling process and outcome?
4. Will males also respond to differences in counselor attire with increased or decreased anxiety?
5. What other counseling outcomes are sensitive to counselor attire?

The answers to these questions will require investigation.